



# Safe Communities: Rural Issues

## Introduction

Traffic injury rates have historically been higher in rural communities than in urban centers. These increased rates have been attributed to the geographic, occupational, and cultural differences between rural and urban societies. Because rural communities are geographically isolated, people must drive longer distances across riskier terrain to conduct common business. Many people living in rural areas make their living off the land, an occupation that carries with it an inherent increased risk of injury. Also, members of rural communities often tend to value stability and are traditionally less receptive to standardized programs that may require change.

Safe Communities is a comprehensive, systematic approach to traffic safety that relies on multiple data sources, expanded partnerships, and citizen involvement to reduce injuries from traffic crashes. Although one cannot alter the geographic, occupational, or cultural characteristics of rural communities, understanding what makes rural different from urban can be utilized to create an ideal environment for a successful Safe Communities project in a rural community.

## What Is Different About Rural Communities?

### Social Systems

Rural communities are characterized by a high level of personal and community level individualism. The uniqueness of the local rural community is a source of definition and pride for its citizens. Standardized programs are usually poorly received. However, citizen driven programs that are designed for a high level of local control are often well received.

### Relationships

Relationships among rural people tend to be more personalized and more permanent than found in urban centers. People are interconnected through informal networks in which everyone knows each other and has a history with each other. Who a person is in relation to other people is at least as important as what his or her roles may be. This close nature of interactions makes the role of public opinion of special concern.

Instances of conspicuous giving are obvious. It is not unusual for rural people to

help each other with anything and everything. To refuse assistance, even when assistance is not specifically requested, is considered deviant to the cultural norms.

Leadership roles are diffuse and thus may not be clearly identified. Often, the people in traditional leadership roles are not the true decision makers in the community.

## **Rural Values**

In urban centers, change is more likely to be perceived as good. In fact, urban culture can often be characterized by change. This is in contrast to rural locations which are very traditional in nature. Stability is highly valued. People do things the way they do because that is how they have always done them.

Freedom and privacy are also highly valued in rural communities. Perceived threats to personal freedom are staunchly defended. For example, legislative efforts designed to change behavior may be perceived as a challenge to personal freedom. Educational efforts, on the other hand, are perceived as providing added choices and are well received by rural people.

Self reliance is also highly valued in rural cultures. People living in rural areas hold in high regard those who take responsibility for themselves, their problems, and solutions. A program that is presented as a means for people to take responsibility for themselves and for their own problems will likely be perceived as compatible with rural cultural values.

## **Communication**

Communications in rural communities tend to vary from those in urban areas. For example, obtaining directions to a specific location in a rural community can be quite challenging. The specific location may be concrete, but the street name and house number are both abstract concepts. After all, the house is a home; the street name or house number were decided upon by someone else quite randomly.

The need to translate abstract messages into concrete examples is imperative. Prevention efforts, because they prevent something that hasn't happened yet, are abstract in nature. Effective tools for making an abstract prevention message more concrete include the use of personal testimonials, photographs, and various types of demonstration equipment.

The use of communication channels also differs between rural and urban communities. Although in rural communities people may learn about new ideas through mass media channels, actual decision making is accomplished through the use of interpersonal communication channels. Local newspapers, school newsletters, and local radio stations can be useful because they involve an exchange of information between local people. Slick national and state media campaigns, however, are usually ignored.

## **Implications of Rurality for the**

# Development of Safe Communities

Traffic safety programs are frequently designed in urban centers by and for urban people. The simple exportation of urban programming into rural cultures has had limited effectiveness. Understanding the values and potential conflicts that are of special concern in rural communities is a critical precursor to the development and implementation of a Safe Communities project in a rural community.

## Multiple Data Sources

An important element of Safe Communities is the use of multiple data sources. By expanding data sources, we can demonstrate the magnitude and consequences of traffic injuries, thereby helping to clarify the problem. Rural communities, however, may not tolerate the perceived invasion of privacy that accompanies the process of formal data collection. Formal data, because it is abstract in nature, may not be trusted as much as personal data that is collected informally through the interconnectedness of the community. As well, rural communities may not see the need for formal data because everyone already knows what is happening.

Sophisticated data collection systems may not be available in some rural communities, making data linkages more difficult to attain. Not all rural hospitals use "E-Codes" for all patients and not all agencies have agreed upon definitions for morbidity and mortality data. In addition, most rural communities do not have a trauma center, so many of those who suffer serious injuries from traffic crashes are transferred out of the community or state for both the acute care and rehabilitative phases of their treatment.

In spite of the inherent limitations, using and linking whatever local data is available is still valuable in defining the problem at the local level. Rural data sources may include crash data from law enforcement, Emergency Medical Services (EMS) runs and auto insurance agents, court data, public health nursing caseloads, jail data, and local newspapers. In addition, resources are always limited and any effort to define costs may increase the community's commitment to funding the proposed solution.

## Expanded Partnerships

In an urban community, the expansion of partnerships called for by Safe Communities may require some thoughtful planning. Which businesses may have an interest in traffic safety? Which health care providers may recognize the benefit of prevention? How can a traffic safety advocate best "market" the concept of prevention to business and health care?

In rural communities links between people already exist. Individuals are asked to participate in a traffic safety program because of who they are rather than because of what they do. Thus, many of these partnerships probably already exist and may need only a more clarified role in the program.

## Citizen Involvement

It is critical that the coordinator of a Safe Communities program be linked to the rural community. If this link is not naturally present, the coordinator must

establish contact within the community that will provide a connection to the leadership. Keep in mind that because leadership roles are diffuse, people in traditional leadership roles may not be the true decision makers in the rural community. A coordinator who is not linked to the community must first identify the leadership. The process of identifying the real leadership differs in rural and urban communities.

In rural communities, leadership is informal. Identifying the natural opinion leaders is accomplished primarily by listening. Visiting with folks where they work provides an opportunity to note their perception of leadership. Observing folks who have breakfast together every morning provides a chance to listen for individual and family names that may be repeated over a cup of coffee.

How opinion leaders interact with the rest of the community differs in rural areas as well. In urban areas there may be limited interaction between one's personal life and professional life. In rural communities, personal and professional lives are often melded together. Business can be conducted ad hoc. Sometimes more can be accomplished in the frozen food aisle of the local grocery store than at a city council meeting.

This network of community members who know each other through multiple avenues provides an opportunity for social control through public opinion. In rural communities one knows who does, and does not, wear safety belts. One knows whose children need bicycle helmets. This knowledge enables concerned citizens to form a coalition so as to have a greater impact on the larger community. Safe Communities Coalition members, through their spheres of influence, have the opportunity to reach many facets of the rural community and are better able to influence decision-making through interpersonal means.

## **Injury Prevention**

The prevention of injuries caused by traffic crashes is of equal concern to rural and urban people. In rural communities, however, the visibility of injury tends to be more apparent. People know the history of the event and must live with the constant reminders. One cannot easily hide or escape in a rural community.

This increased visibility is an asset. Injury prevention is no longer about something that hasn't happened yet. Now it is about something that did happen, and everyone remembers when and where. The very real, sincere, inter-connectedness among rural people translates well into prevention messages that promote people taking care of people (for example, "Buckle Up the Ones You Love"). By appealing to personal and community responsibility for injury prevention, ownership of the problem and a commitment to Safe Communities is assured.

## **Summary: Implications for Project Development and Implementation**

There are both ethical and pragmatic dilemmas in implementing some traffic safety programs in rural communities. For example, the cultural conflict between the documented success of sobriety checkpoints in reducing impaired driving and

the ethical issue of random surveillance in a democratic society is especially problematic in rural areas characterized by extreme value in self reliance and individual freedom. Successful traffic safety programs may need to be adapted and tailored for rural communities.

In establishing Safe Communities in rural areas, consideration should be given to the following priorities: identification of the true leadership, maximum use of interpersonal communication channels, reliance on local program control, and, ultimately, acceptance of the reality that successful change will only occur slowly.

The Safe Communities initiative is ideally suited for adaptation to a rural community. While incongruities in values are inevitable, awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the rural community and its values will lend some light in deciding how to reduce death and injury from traffic crashes. In other words, how to do the things we can do and not waste limited resources on those we cannot do.

## About the Author

Lorrie Pozarik is originally from the New York City metropolitan area and has lived and worked in Wyoming for the last 17 years. She has an M.S. in nursing with a specialty in Rural Health from the University of Wyoming. Pozarik is the Director of the Traffic Safety Program in Fremont County, WY which was implemented in 1987 as a Community Traffic Safety Program (CTSP) designed to prevent death and injury from traffic crashes. The last several years have brought about an evolution of the original CTSP into a Safe Communities project. In addition to directing the traffic safety program, Pozarik has made numerous presentations on Rural Traffic Safety Programs and issues at national and regional professional meetings.

